

“The Development of a More Intelligent Citizenship”

John Dewey and the Social Studies

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Abstract

This paper describes John Dewey’s attitude regarding the potential for the social studies as a vehicle for citizenship education. During the 1930s, Dewey specifically addressed his concerns for teaching social studies in two articles. By situating these concerns within his framework for democratic education, he outlines the potential for creating participatory citizens. This goal for citizenship education is still relevant today, especially given the current political climate.

Introduction

In 1937, John Dewey wrote optimistically that “. . . the isolation of knowledge from social action is breaking down,” and he said one indication of this trend was “. . . the increasingly important place held by the social studies in the American school” (Dewey, 1937, p. 185). What makes this statement significant is Dewey’s direct reference to the social studies as a curricular area, because he rarely cited social studies in his voluminous works. Yet, even though his direct references to the social studies are few, we can infer much about Dewey’s opinion of the social studies as a potentially valuable subject for preparing students to become citizens in a democratic republic. In this essay I situate Dewey’s references to the social studies in the context of his views on democratic education. In so doing, I will extrapolate a description of his guardedly optimistic view of the possibilities for the social studies and also his concerns.

Dewey and Education in a Democracy

Dewey's vision of democracy was a dynamic one. Democracy, he felt, was not a static concept or one that could be achieved in a finite sense. Rather it was a fluid, evolutionary process that promoted "... the ideal manifestation of community life . . ." (Boisvert, 1998, p. 55). Schools, as the major educative institutions through which most children pass, had the responsibility to prepare them to become democratic citizens. The school was "... a miniature community, an embryonic society . . ." and was well-suited to prepare the child to function in the larger and rapidly changing democratic society that existed outside (Dewey, 1902, p. 18).

The distinction between being a member of a community and a member of a society was significant for Dewey. Dewey (1927) defined society as "either an abstract or a collective noun" (p. 69). In the abstract, society is "relatively impersonal" and lacks the face-to-face contact afforded by the voluntary associations of people living in it. Society, while appearing to be uniform, in reality is composed of these multiple communities. Such associations are based on religion (e.g., religious organizations), politics (e.g., political parties or special interest groups), and/or hobbies (e.g., service clubs or amateur athletic teams/leagues), to name but a few. It is these voluntary associations based on different shared experiences that afford individuals the connectedness to one another that promotes social living—especially since they often cut across socioeconomic distinctions. "Associated or joint activity is a condition of the creation of a community" and helps to clarify the distinction between society and community for Dewey (1927, p. 149). Also society reflects the interaction of the forces of political democracy and modern capitalism. Dewey (1902) viewed the societal changes resulting from the impersonal forces of industrialization in dramatic terms and therefore believed they reinforced the importance of people's connections to their various communities (p. 9). It is through the associations and communities that are formed that citizens are able to most immediately address their wants and needs (Dewey, 1927, pp. 106–107).

One of the most important wants or needs of a community is the appropriate education of its citizens, and therefore schools are necessary institutions to deliver this service. Dewey's school was ideally a "... a model of community life. . . ." He believed that it must provide the opportunity for students to learn using methods that would reinforce the social connectedness of their existence. By doing so, what is learned is "... acquired in such a way that they become *moving* ideas, motive-forces in the guidance of conduct" (1909, p. 2, original emphasis).

We must take the child as a member of society in the broadest sense, and demand for and from the schools whatever is necessary to enable the child intelligently to recognize all his social relations and take part in sustaining them. (1909, pp. 8–9)

In a democratic republic the school culture must reflect democratic practices. This is especially true for citizenship education, since Dewey saw students as citizens-in-

training. The "formal relationship of citizenship" must be "interwoven" into the fabric of the social life of the school (Dewey, 1909, pp. 9–11). This is the end toward which schooling should be directed.

In *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey made explicit the moral and civic purposes of education. Education is needed for any culture to maintain the bonds that unite its members. These bonds are the qualities that distinguish it from any other culture, including values, traditions, information, skills and expectations. "Education, in its broadest sense, is the means of this social continuity of life" (1916, p. 2). The requirements of living in a democratic society put unique expectations on its schools. This is due in part to the complexity of a democracy. "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjunct communicated experience" (Dewey, 1916, p. 87). Popular conceptions of democracy focus more on particular components of democracy or on narrow procedural understandings. Democracy understood as "government by the people" implies a procedural understanding, especially in terms of practices like voting for officials or in terms of concepts such as majority rule. Still others understand democracy to mean a system in which individual freedom is protected and individual liberty is oversimplified to mean the ability "to do one's own thing." While these concepts and others may be the tesserae that make up the mosaic of democracy, Dewey saw it in a much more complex way. According to Dewey, narrowly defined democratic practices were, in fact, supports on which true democratic idealism was built. He believed that democracy should promote the growth of individuality. Through participation in the multiple associations of daily living, individual citizens would encounter other citizens developing their own individuality.

Citizens, therefore, move freely among different concentric circles of citizenship activity as they go about their daily lives at work, at home, at play and at school. Schools must afford students the chance to see these different realms of activity and their own connection to them. "Education in democratic communities faces the task of enlarging the horizons of its participants, so that there are multiple opportunities for people from different social groups to share common interests" (Boisvert, 1998, p. 109). By doing this, a citizen is likely to encounter people of all occupations, races, classes, and ethnicities. And because a democracy is an evolving system, individuals living in this system will continue to develop on a personal level as well. They will consciously choose to see their relationships and connections as "mutually interpenetrating" and thus feel empowered to attack "those barriers of race, class, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity" (Dewey, 1916, p. 87). It is essential that the student learns that a citizen is more than a voter. "He is to be a member of some particular neighborhood and community, and must contribute to the values of life, add to the decencies and graces of civilization wherever he is" (Dewey, 1897a, p. 113). It is up to the schools, therefore, to provide students with the educative experiences that enable them to see the truth of this complicated understanding of democratic education.

Dewey and the Social Studies

The question I pose here is: How did Dewey see the role of the social studies in facilitating the complex process of democratic education? Part of the answer to this question is grounded in Dewey's understanding of democracy. Since democracy for Dewey was more than a political system and more than simply a process, it was necessary for citizenship education in a democracy to also be more complex. Democracy was a paradigm to be accomplished and lived. Citizens should continually strive to improve their application of democratic ideals learned in the social studies classroom throughout the school and eventually in all walks of life. In this regard we can extrapolate the relevance of the social studies. Though Dewey did not see learning as isolated to specific subject areas, he did believe that "... the only way to make the child conscious of his social heritage is to enable him to perform those fundamental types of activities which make civilization what it is" (Dewey, 1897b, p. 433). Certainly such consciousness of heritage and of the meanings of civilization is basic to the curriculum of the social studies. Furthermore, Dewey believed that two of the major components of the social studies, namely history and geography, "supply subject matter which gives background and outlook, intellectual perspective, to what might otherwise be narrow personal actions or mere forms of technical skills" (Dewey, 1916, p. 208). Combined they "are the information studies *par excellence* of the schools" (Dewey, 1916, p. 210, italics in original). They "are the two great school resources bringing about the enlargement of the significance of a direct personal experience" and could thus allow a person to see herself/himself more clearly in the evolving social context existent in the United States (Dewey, 1916, p. 218). For Dewey, history and geography, then, have a unique role in preparing students for citizenship, a universally accepted goal of the social studies.

London (2000) has argued that Dewey's vision of democratic citizenship "was an inherently participatory ideal" which represented a more or less contrarian perspective to that of democratic realists such as Walter Lippmann. Not content with a limited understanding of representative democracy advocated by others, Dewey believed citizens should be empowered to exercise freedom "in the positive sense of the word" (Dewey, 1891, p. 344). A well-educated participatory citizenry benefited the community at the same time that it enhanced the individual's personal satisfaction in all areas of social life. Thus the relationship between the citizen and his/her community was essentially symbiotic. The laboratory of democracy was the community. "Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community" (Dewey, 1927, p. 213). London goes on to accurately describe Dewey's view of democracy as "synergistic and evolving." Indeed, Dewey was clearly influenced by Darwinism. Not only did he believe that ideas and cultures were evolving, but democracy as a process was evolutionary. In essence, one's education was a causal factor in one's personal growth—one's personal evolution, if you will.

Similarly, the evolution of the social studies as a discipline mirrors the evolution of the individual in a democratic society. Barr, Barth, and Shermis (1977) describe this as they identify the "three social studies traditions" used to define the

social studies. As a result of their analysis they conclude—in the tradition of John Dewey—that citizenship education need provide “actual participatory activities” as a kind of litmus test for the effectiveness of what students learn (p. 68). They redefine the social studies, at least their understanding of it in the last quarter of the twentieth century, as “an integration of experience and knowledge concerning human relations for the purpose of citizenship education” (p. 69). The continual evolution of democracy and the consequent need to adapt social studies education to produce participatory citizens is reflected in contemporary curriculum documents as well (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994).

More than two decades after writing *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey foreshadowed these contemporary issues when he made two explicit references to the social studies. In the 1930s, the battles over controlling the social studies curriculum, and by extension citizenship education, were pitched in terms that were “overtly ideological.” Situated in the throes of the Great Depression, “turf battles between advocates of history and the newer social studies continued, along with increasing attention to the teaching of social problems, controversial issues, and Problems of Democracy” (Evans, 2004, pp. 46–47). Some reformers saw this as the opportunity to address the ills of the capitalist system and urged schools to transform the social order (Counts, 1932). Others urged that the social studies curriculum be integrated or fused in order to unite the disparate threads into one curriculum (Evans, 2004, p. 47). It was in this context that Dewey identified both the possibilities of and his concerns for the subject. In 1938 he focused on the problematic issues concerning the social studies. For one thing, the curriculum was potentially so broad, so extensive, that it was at risk of being uncontrollable.

In the new proper emphasis upon [the] social studies, the primary problem it seems to me, is to determine the scope and range of the subject matter designated by “social”. . . . The problem I am raising is how far such materials can be understood and be educative in the full sense without a background of study of matters which lie outside of the social as thus listed. (Dewey, 1938b, p. 180)

The danger of treating geography, economic and political history, and other social issues while integrating literature, the fine arts, and other subject matter is that “if it is accepted it swells the social studies beyond all limits,” causing both teachers and students to be “confronted with an unwieldy, unmanageable mass” (Dewey, 1938b, p. 182). The possibilities afforded by the social studies were so promising for Dewey that he urged that they should not exist separately in isolation from other curricula but instead “should give direction and organization to *all branches of study*” (1938b, p. 183, emphasis added). In the final analysis, though, Dewey was concerned that the teaching of social studies would likely fall into one of two categories (uncharacteristically posing the issue as a dichotomy): “either accumulations of bodies of special factual information or . . . to be organs of indoctrination in the sense of propaganda for a special social end . . .” (Dewey, 1938b, p. 183). This was problematic because, rather than being a vehicle by which democratic education could be

promoted throughout the school curriculum, the social studies would be reduced to a specialized end that would severely limit its usefulness.

Yet a year earlier, Dewey wrote of the social studies in more optimistic terms. He said social studies occupied “an increasingly important place . . . in the American school” (1937, p. 185). Once again he focused on the burden for schools imposed by the democratic culture.

Only as the coming generation learns in the schools to understand the social forces that are at work, the directions and the cross-directions in which they are moving, the consequences that they might produce if they were understood and managed with intelligence—only as the schools provide this understanding, have we any assurance that they are meeting the challenge which is put to them by democracy. (1937, p. 183)

Providing “an understanding of the movement and direction of social forces that may be used to satisfy them” is critical for schools in a democratic society (1937, p. 183). This need for understanding is critical for the continual evolution, and, therefore, the very existence, of democracy. Dewey insisted on the need for students to not only acquire information but to understand the larger ideas behind the facts. Moreover, such understanding was linked to the need for citizens to act:

Understanding has to be in terms of how things work and how to do things. Understanding, by its very nature, is related to action; just as information, by its very nature, is isolated from action or connected with it only here and there by accident. (1937, p. 184)

It is in this regard, as it related to the potential for connecting knowledge and action, that Dewey specifically mentioned the social studies. The unique nature of the social studies’ having “a more intimate relation with social life than a great many of the other subjects that are taught in school” seemingly made it the ideal vehicle to promote the basic democratic end of “the development of a more intelligent citizenship in all ranges of citizenship” (1937, p. 185). Of course, mining the potential of the social studies required that the material be taught not as isolated information about history, geography, or economics but using methods to enable students to make connections between them and their experiences. Otherwise, students learning only isolated facts would be “the easy prey of skillful politicians and political machines; the victims of political misrepresentation” (1937, p. 185) upon graduation. Lacking the requisite analytic and critical skills, students could be easily misled and unable to differentiate fact from opinion even as reported in the daily newspapers. The information-based form of civic education would not lead to “intelligent voting” or to “intelligent legislation.” Frustrated, Dewey wondered if this kind of education could adequately prepare a person “for any kind of democratic self-government” (1937, p. 186).

Taken together, these two references seem to constitute a guarded optimism on Dewey’s part regarding the *potential* for the social studies. In the two essays I have cited, Dewey wrote of “the increasingly important place held by the social studies”

and of "the new proper emphasis upon social studies." This emphasis was merited in part because of what he saw as its ideal connection to citizenship education and the goal of "the development of a more intelligent citizenship." Dewey's assumption that this was the goal of social studies stems from much of the literature that evolved earlier in the twentieth century. For example, in 1916 the National Education Association (NEA) published a report that "is usually considered a turning point in the history of the social studies" (Thornton, 1996, p. 3). Representing three years worth of work, the committee responsible for this report believed "with conviction that the secondary school teachers of social studies have a remarkable opportunity to improve the citizenship of the land" (NEA, 1913, p. 201). Furthermore, citizenship education was identified as being the special purview of the social studies. "More specifically, the social studies of the American high school should have for their conscious and constant purpose the cultivation of *good citizenship*" (NEA, 1913, p. 204, emphasis added).

In 1921, Harold and Earle Rugg used *The Historical Outlook* (forerunner to *The Social Studies*) as a vehicle to promote the social studies as the ideal curriculum for teaching citizenship education in the United States. Under the title "How Shall We Reconstruct the Social Studies Curriculum?" Harold Rugg issued "a call to arms for a new organization—NCSS" (Pahl, 2001, p. 53). The clear aim of this organization was to bring together all those "interested in obtaining maximum results in education for citizenship through the social studies" (H. O. Rugg, 1921, p. 54). Earle Rugg's proposal was for the meeting of this new organization—called The National Council of Teachers of the Social Studies—"as soon as convenient" (E. Rugg, 1921, p. 55). This organization would become the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), and from its inception it has promoted citizenship education as one of the fundamental objectives for social studies educators. The earliest constitution of the NCSS included the goal of "obtaining the maximum results in education for citizenship from social studies" (Evans, 2004, p. 37). Quoted in the 1916 report and as a contemporary of Rugg, it is no wonder that Dewey found the potential for the social studies as a vehicle for educating democratic citizens to be a unique opportunity.

The problem for Dewey was not in using the social studies to teach citizenship but in how this teaching was being implemented. Either the curriculum would become so inflated with the vast information afforded by the various social studies subject areas, causing a manageable curriculum to "get submerged in a great flood of miscellaneous social study," or the methodology employed would reduce the course to learning an increasing amount of factual information and minutiae, which would trivialize the subject matter to be learned (1937, p. 185; 1938b, p. 183). If these were the two probable results, Dewey would rather see the social studies abandoned altogether. This would essentially make the curriculum more manageable and would therefore unburden teachers and free them to more effectively teach citizenship education to their students. Additionally, Dewey's conception of democratic citizenship demanded democratic classrooms that would adequately prepare students to enter a radically transformed society beyond the school's walls.

The obvious fact is that our social life has undergone a thorough and radical change. If our education is to have any meaning for life, it must pass through an equally complete transformation. (Dewey, 1900, p. 28)

Traditional schooling and citizenship training were no longer adequate in a progressive America. Active democratic participation required active democratic learning. The challenge was “to make school life more active, more full of immediate meaning, more connected with out-of-school experience.” Failure to do so would reduce the school to being “an instrument of perpetuating unchanged the existing industrial order of society, instead of operating as a means of its transformation” (Dewey, 1916, p. 316). In this sense, too, the social studies, properly defined and free from extraneous content, was the ideal subject for preparing activist citizens.

Marker and Mehlinger (1992) argue that citizenship education as a concept or discipline is “devoid of meaning for curricular purposes” and that, therefore, the “agreed-upon purpose of social studies” is “virtually useless for curricular purposes” (pp. 832–833). For Dewey, the purposes and methods of social studies intersect to afford a solution to this dilemma. Effective preparation to teach citizenship would require a methodology that sought to connect “school subject matter” with “the realities of everyday life” (Dewey, 1916, p. 163). In achieving this, of course, the role of the teacher is critical. “He must be aware of the potentialities for leading students into new fields which belong to experiences already had, and must use this knowledge as his criterion for selection and arrangement of conditions that influence their present experience” (Dewey, 1938a, p. 76). In this manner, students can individualize their understanding of the material as it connects to their own experience. And thus the learning process evolves. To properly learn how to be citizens, students need activities that will connect their learning of political concepts to the reality of using these concepts in practice. The creation of these activities is the challenge facing the social studies educator. In this regard Marker and Mehlinger agree with Dewey, for they assert that at heart, “the formal curriculum is what each teacher decides it will be” (p. 841). And this is why Dewey was optimistic for the potential of the social studies: teachers could use their expertise in managing the curriculum to guide in the reconstruction of the experiences of students to produce truly democratic citizens.

Conclusion

Dewey saw great potential for the social studies. The expansion of the social studies curriculum “ought to be a means by which the school system meets the challenge of democracy” (Dewey, 1937, p. 185). This challenge was represented both in terms of students adapting to and succeeding in a radically transformed society and also in terms of their becoming participatory democratic citizens. This was essential according to Dewey’s meaning of democracy. However, he also saw the dangers inherent in a curriculum that was so broad. One of his major concerns was the danger of the curriculum being too inclusive. Adding more information or content would only add to “a curriculum that is already overburdened,” thereby jeopardizing the

most important goal of the social studies—"the development of a more intelligent citizenship" (Dewey, 1937, p. 185). Overloading the curriculum would jeopardize the requisite citizenship education for a democracy because it would "get submerged in a great flood of miscellaneous social study" (Dewey, 1937, p. 185).

In many ways schools in general, and social studies education in particular, have fallen victim to these very problems. Expanding curricula emphasize breadth over depth. In addition, high-stakes testing as a way to achieve higher standards reinforces learning of specific facts which are often decontextualized from the major themes existent in the social studies. Social studies curricula are often described as being "a mile wide and an inch thick." This concern is aggravated in the current political climate in the United States, in which traditional political and cultural values are privileged. Dewey's progressive vision of citizenship, and therefore citizenship education, is incongruent with this climate. Studies reveal that the citizenship education that students receive is characterized by learning decontextualized facts rather than major themes or concepts (Niemi and Junn, 1998), and further, that national assessments of student knowledge specifically emphasize institutional and factual knowledge over questions dealing with contemporary politics or political attitudes (Niemi and Sanders, 2004). National commentators lament that "Americans have become Constitutional dunces" (Selvin, 2005, p. A6). Political agendas distort what represents the "correct view" of American traditional history, politics, and culture. For example, the U.S. Department of Education destroyed hundreds of thousands of guides to teaching history designed for parents because they referred to the National History Standards, which Lynne Cheney, wife of vice president Dick Cheney, has long opposed (Alonso-Zaldivar and Merl, 2004; the standards are available at <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/nchs/standards>).

The consequences in the present conservative climate for the social studies were foreseen by Dewey. In particular, he feared citizenship education being characterized by our

faith in the truly miraculous and magical power of information. If students would only learn their federal and state Constitution, the names and duties of all the officers and all the rest of the anatomy of the government, they would be prepared to be good citizens. (Dewey, 1937, p. 185)

This kind of civic education would not prepare the active citizenry he felt to be essential for a democracy. National curricular frameworks and standards for citizenship education do not address this problem sufficiently. Studies have indicated that these documents do not adequately encourage being the participatory citizens Dewey felt were required in a democracy. The *National Standards for Civics and Government* (Center for Civic Education, 1994) emphasize "knowledge, attitudes, and values to the near exclusion of active, informed participation" and essentially ignore the kind of civic education that "will be translated into effective citizenship that embodies active engagement in civic life" (Gonzalez et al., 2001, p. 123). Likewise *CIVITAS: A Framework for Civic Education* (Center for Civic Education, 1991) fails "to offer a more effective citizenship education program" because "it reinforces

a passive citizenry” (Carpenter, 2001, pp. 215–216). These documents are evidence of the continued rejection of the liberal democratic citizenship Dewey envisioned. Dewey would be dismayed that our approach is largely the same today as when he wrote these words and that we still emphasize a passive view of citizenship.

Yet the promise Dewey envisioned for the social studies is still possible. The potential for engaging students in meaningful, participatory activities in which they not only read about democratic living but actually practice it in school settings is what led Dewey to be optimistic about social studies education. As we move further into the twenty-first century, an activist understanding of citizenship is what drives thousands of social studies teachers across the United States. In New York State, seniors are required to pass a mandated twenty-week course entitled “Participation in Government.” This course is “the civics capstone of a student’s K–12 social studies experience” and represents a “commitment to active citizenship through active learning” (New York State Education Department, 2002, p. iii). Teachers across the state encourage students to not only know their rights and responsibilities but to analyze and reflect on policy decisions and to actively commit to community projects. Service learning in many states has proven to not only promise the potential for involving students of all ages in developing a sense of community responsibility but also demonstrate the reality of doing so (Wade, 2000). Though difficult, teachers find ways to develop meaningful and active lessons across the social studies curriculum. Evidence of this spirit is available at any state social studies convention or by reviewing any social studies journal where articles describe how the complexities of democracy and the characteristics of a participatory citizen are being taught at the elementary and secondary levels (e.g. Kesson 2004; Smith 2004; Risenger 2003; Yeager and Silva, 2002). By rejecting the narrow view of teaching bits of historical information and instead employing strategies that energize their classrooms, these teachers are bringing a depth and power to the social studies that would make Dewey proud.

Notes

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